Hawthorne and Sin - An Introduction (1)

Eriya Tanase

1. Hawthorne and Puritans

Many of Hawthorne's works were about the Puritans and their age. One of the reasons was that this age,in which people still believed in supernatural things,and thought in terms of symbolism and allegory, was best fitted for his purposes.

In the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne says that for a romance-writer, as he termed himself, the best place was "a neutral territory somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary meer,and each imbue itself with the nature of the other." (105)

When a story was set in Puritan times,he could easily make this "neutral territory" . Many of his best works treat the Puritan and their times, *The Scarlet Letter* and "Young Goodman Brown", for example.

Hawthorne's favorite writers in English literature were Spenser, Milton, and Bunyan. The Puritan Virtues,present in all of them, Hawthorne found also in large measure in the early writers of New England. From them came the figures and the moods which were to characterize the world of his fiction.

Being a descendant of the Puritans, Hawthorne was drawn to them by ancestral ties.

He was drawn to them, too, by his patriotic and democratic sympathies, for the English Puritans had struck a blow for freedom in the regicide of Charles, and the New England Puritans had struck blows even more decisive (like those celebrated in "Endicott and the Red Cross" and "The Gray Champion") which had their logical cul-

mination Hawathorne thought,in the American Revolution. He was drawn to them, again, by his perception of certain basic truths in their doctrine.

The attraction did not blind him to their faults and limitations. Hawthorne repeatedly castigates them for their bigotry, intolerance, and cruelty. In "The Maypole of Merry Mount", Endicott is an "immitigable zealot," the Puritans are "most dismal wretches". In The "Gentle Boy", Puritan children -- "a brood of baby fiends" who have caught the contagion of their parents' haterd —brutally attack and all but kill poor Ilbrahim, the Quaker child. Of the five women who gather close to the platform where Hester Prynne, the adultress, stands in the public gaze, only one takes a charitable view on her case.

2. Puritan's lifeview

With a historian's perspective,he could fairly judge the persecutors and the persecuted as well. If forced to choose between the rival parties at Merry Mount, Hawthorne would go with Endicott, for life must not be spent in wanton revelry,but the sympathetic characters are the Lord and Lady of the May, who, though they renounce the vanities of the revelers, may be supposed to bring to the Puritan community a graciousness and innocent mirth. In "The Gentle Boy", Hawthorne approves neither of the Puritans, the bloody persecutors, nor of the Quakers, those unbridled fancies who disturb the peace of the community and seemed even to invite the scourge and dungeon. Aside from Ilbrahim, the victim of the tale,the most sympathetic character is Dorothy Pearson, the kindly Puritan who gives Ilbrahim a home. She represents, the author says, "rational piety" .

Before he could approve of Puritanism, it would have to undergo a good deal of modification in the disrection of tolerance, charity and common sense, but despite the reservations, his leaning was to the Puritan view of life.

He was concerned with "the truth of the human heart" (as he put it in his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*) rather than with theology. But some of the tenets of the Puritans seemed in many ways to square with human experience. Evil is a reality in the world; the depravity of the unregenerate man is no myth. There seems to be in human affairs a kind of predestination, which Hawthorne calls (depending on whether its manifestation is malignant or benevolent) now Fate, now Providence. If Hawthorne's emphasis is upon sin more than salvation, the reason in part may have been that the optimism of his age seemed to him to need tempering more than encouraging. "Human destinies look ominous," he said in *The Blithedale Romance*.

Unitarians and Transcendentalists and scientists too, Hawthorne thought, painted too bright a picture; they underestimated the human difficulties and the element of struggle. Hawthorne's view is expressed in a satirical allegory, "The Celestial Railroad". When the narrator is told that "Apollyon,Christian's old enemy [has been] reconciled••• to the custom of going on pilgrimage, and engaged as chief engineer", his words are "Bravo, bravo!••• this shows the liberality of the age ••• And how will Christian rejoice to hear of this happy transformation of his old antagonist!" (478).

The prevailling Christian thought of Hawthorne's age was Liberalism, which was represented by Uniterianism. In liberal theology, sin and evil is not made much of, and the fundamental good nature of man is emphasized.

3. Evil in Puritans

It is easy to see that Hawthorne was opposed to Liberalism, when one think of his deep interest in sin and evil. (The words "the liberality of the age" are significant.)

To Hawthorne's eyes, however, the presence of evil loomed dark and large from the begining of his career as writer, and he saw evil

as something whose universality and formidableness no one could deny. He treated in his works, almost with obsession, the problem of evil and human nature. His Satanic characters and sinners are all studies of the connection between man and evil.

There were many obstacles and hardships which faced the Puritans and many temptations troubled them. They attributed all such things to the evilness of Satan's power.

Puritans of course believed in the final victory and glory of God, but they held a belief that to fight and resist this power of evil was of utmost importance. Evil was a very real thing for them, and also had a significant place in their God-centered world. They believed in the Calvinistic doctrine of the Original Sin and Total Depravity, admitting the evil nature of Man.

Melville, in his often-quoted review of Hawthorne's "Mosses from the Old Manse", points out Hawthorne's "blackness", and connects it with Calvinism: "Certain it is... that this great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin..."

4. Sin in Hawthorne's Works

We have already seen that Hawthorne was deeply interested in the sinful nature of man, but how does he treat it in his works? I shall examine firstly his idea of original sin -- the concept which was accepted by the Puritans and rejected by Emerson.

In *The House of Seven Gables* Phoebe notices the resemblance between Judge Pyncheon and the picture of his ancestor Colonel Pyncheon. In an authorial comment,Hawthorne says "something very terrible" might be found from this fact by a "deeper philosopher than Phoebe," namely, the idea that "the weaknesses and defects, the bad passions, the mean tendencies, and the moral diseases which lead to crime, are handed down from one generation to another, by a far surer process of transmission than human law has been able to establish, in respect

to the riches and honors which it seeks to entail upon posterity" (314). There is no specific mention of original sin, but the idea bears remarkable resemblance to the Calvinistic view of that sin, a hereditary depravity and corruption of haman nature.

In "Fancy's Show-Box," "some sad and awful truths" are stated: "Man must not disclaim his brotherhood, even with the guiltiest, since thought his hand be clean, his heart has surely been polluted by the flittering phantoms of iniquity. He must feel that, when he shall knock at the gate of heaven, no semblance of an unspotted life can entitle him to entrance there. Penitence must kneel, and Mercy come from the footstool of the throne, or that golden gate will never open!" (428)This statement is in accordance with the teaching concerning original sin, which says all are guilty in Adam.

Thus, even though Hawthorne's may not treat the idea of original sin specifically, ideas which are closely connected with it can be seen in his works.

Though a man is not personally responsible for original sin, its consequences are upon him. Hawthorne's moral in *The House of the Seven Gables* parallels this fact: "the truth, namely that the wrongdoing of one generation lives into the successive ones,and divesting itself of every temporary advantage, becomes a pure and uncontrollable mischief" (243).

Avarice and egotism of Colonel Pyncheon passes throught the ages to reappear in Judge Pyncheon, causing Chifford and Hepzibah to suffer. Consequences of sin upon others can be seen in other works of Hawthorn. Until Pearl's "spell" is broken, she was "wild", inheriting her mother's nature. Zenobia's proud nature comes from her father, Pricilla's frailty from her mother. In *The Marble Faun*, Hilda, an innocent girl suffers from sin commited by Miriam and Donatello.

When a man himself is responsible for sin, this sin, called "actual sin" , always has its effects on him in Hawthorne's fiction. Sin is a stain upon the soul. That is the first consequence of sin, Hawthorne

says. "What is guilt?" he asks himself in "Fancy's Show-Box," a stain upon the soul. And it is a point of vast interest whether the soul may contract such stains, in all their depth and flagrancy from deeds which may have been plotted and resolved upon, but which physically, have never had existance. Must the fleshly hand and visible frame of man set its seal to the evil designs of the soul, in order to give them their validity against the sinner?" (422). The term guilt here can clearly be taken as a synonym for sin.

Furthermore, this stain seems ineradicable. A purely authorial comment in *The Scarlet Letter* represents Hawthorne's view: "And be the stern and sad truth spoken, that breach which guilt has once made into the human is never, in this mortal state, repaired." (203)

Stain has become "breach" , but since both is something that happens to soul by sin, the two can be considered the same thing. Thus, personal sin ineradicably stains the soul of the person sinning. This is the inward consequence of sin.

Sin always causes suffering in Hawthorne's fiction. This suffering is closily related to isolation, which Hawthorne believes is the outward consequence of sin. There are numerous examples of this point.

In "Egotism; or, The Bosom Serpent", there is an authorial comment which illustrates the reason why personal evil leads to isolation :

> All persons chronically diseased are egotists, whether the disease be of the mind or body; whether it be sin, sorrow, or merely the more tolerable calamity of some endless pain, or mischief among the cords of mortal life. Such individuals are made acutely consicious of a self, by the torture in which it dwells. Self, therefore, grows to be so prominent an object with them that they cannot but presnt it to the face of every casual passer-by. There is a pleasure -- perhaps the greatest of which the sufferer is susceptble -- in displaying the wasted or ulcerated limb, or the cancer in the breast; and the fouler the crime, with so much the more difficulty does the perpetrator

prevent it from thrusting up its snake-like head to frighten the world; for it is that cancer, or that crime, which constitutes their [sic] respective individuality. (254)

Roderick Elliston's serpent is the symbol of jealousy. The consequence of this sin is that he "estranged himself from all companionship" (252). Later, when he tried "to establish a species of brotherhood between himself and the world" (255), he become the "pest of the city" (258), and put in an asylum, where he spent his days "in solitude" (258).

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne's scarlet letter symbolizing adultery "had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself" (116).

In *The Marble Faun*, the isolation of Miriam and Donatello is depicted. Before the murder, the creatures of the forest were Donatello's friends. The "green and blue lizards ••• scrupled not to scramble over him with their small feet" and the birds "sang their little roundelays unbroken by any chirrup of alarm; they recognized him ••• as something akin to themselves" (632). After he has commited sin, he tries to communicate with his "friends" in Monte Beni, but fails: "••• [a] venomous reptile was the only creature that had responded to the young Count's efforts to renew his intercourse with the lower orders of Nature" (733).Donatello acknowledges his alienation: "They shun me! All nature shrinks from me, and shudders at me! I live in the midst of a curse,that hems me round with a circle of fire! No innocent thing can come near me " (733).

Donatello is also estranged from Kennyon:

"I have a weakness which I fear I cannot overcome," replied [the Count, turning away his face. "It troubles me to be looked at steadfastly."

"I have observed it since we have been sitting here ••• " rejoined the sculptor ••• "It need be no hindrance to my taking your best

••• " "You may take me if you have the power," said Donatello, but, even as he spoke, he turned away his face; "and if you can see what makes me shrink from you, you are welcome to put it in the bust. It is not by will, but my necessity, to avoid men's eyes ••• " (720-721).

Miriam was already alienated before the murder, for, though not told specifically, it is clear that she has connection with some dark sin. Concerning Miriam and the Capuchin, Hawthorne says: "[A solitude] perhaps symbolized a peculiar character in the relation of these two, insulating them, and building up an insuperable barrier between their life-streams and other currents, which might seem to flow in close vicinity. For it is one of the chief earthly incommodities ••• of a great crime, that it makes the actor ••• an alien in the world, by interposing a wholly unsympathetic medium betwixt himself and those whom he yearns to meet" (642). Later, when Miriam goes to meet Kenyon, "the voiceless gulf between herself and them [Hilda and Ken yon]" (655) is mentioned. Also stated is the principle that the "perception of an infinite, shivering solitude, amid which we cannot come close enough to haman beings to be warmed by them ••• is one of the most forlorn results of any ••• crime ••• that puts an individual ajar with the world." (655)

*The texts are, *The Complete Novels & Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Modern Library Edition,Random House, for the novels (*The Scarlet Letter, The House of the Seven Gables, The Blithedale Romance, The Marble Faun*), and *Hawthorne--Selected Tales and Sket ches*, Rinehart Editions, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, for tales and sketches. The numbers following quotations are page numbers in each text.